DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 094 376 CS 201 203

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TITLE Urban Black Speech as the Sixth Clock.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (63rd, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS American English; Cultural Factors; English Instruction; *Language Classification; Language Instruction; Language Patterns; Language Styles; *Negro Dialects; Nonstandard Dialects; Social Dialects; Speech Habits; *Standard Spoken Usage; *Urban Language; *Urban Youth

ABSTRACT

Teachers of culturally different students should not ridicule or verbally abuse their students, but should try to show them how the characteristics of formal English differ from urban Black English. They must be able to explain the appropriateness of standard English usage in certain situations, while they still maintain respect for the students' language. Urban black speech is not a separate dialect from standard English but it is a functional variety of American English, characterized by ellipsis, jargon, and slang. This is demonstrated in the way educated blacks shift from Black English to formal English. Joos, the author of "Five Clocks," defines urban black speech as the sixth clock, a variety of English between casual and intimate speech with the features of both. He believes that everyone uses several functional varieties of English. Some of these styles are: the frozen style, which is used for print in legal documents or in briefs before the Supreme Court; the formal style, which is usually used in lectures and is the style most English composition teachers require; the casual style, which is the speech used with friends and acquaintances; and the intimate style, which is used in intimate conversation with close friends or lovers. (SW)

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URBAN BLACK SPEECH

AS THE SIXTH CLOCK

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NATIONAL COUNCIL

OF

TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

National Convention

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

November 23, 1973

CS 201 203

English teachers, especially composition teachers, are constantly faced with the problem of what to do with Urban Black Speech (UBS). In the last few years there has been a great deal of controversy over what it is and how it should be handled in the classroom. UBS has at times been treated as a separate language, and one group of educators recommend that we use the same techniques to teach standard English (SE) to inner city Blacks that we use to teach English to speakers of a foreign language. Of course, this is an extreme position; but many English teachers feel, whether they admit it or not, that UBS is an inferior brand of English that is somehow incoherent, illogical, and chaotic.

I propose that UBS is neither a separate language nor a separate dialect from SE. UBS is a functional variety of American English. That it is not a separate dialect is shown by the way educated Blacks, in an intra-ethnic context, often shift back and forth between UBS and other functional varieties of American English. They will use a formal variety of English when they are engaged in an intellectual discussion and may use UBS when speaking informally with a friend. A shift from formal English to UBS sometimes occurs in writing as well, usually for effect. Many examples of this can be found in Geneva Smitherman's "God Don't Never Change: Black English from a Black Perspective" (1973).

Within the framework of Joos's Five Clocks, UBS can be considered the sixth clock, a variety of English between casual and intimate speech with features of each. Joos contends that everyone uses several functional varieties of English. "Proper" English is what is appropriate

for a given situation. The five varieties that Joos has named are:

1) Frozen
2) Formal
3) Consultative
4) Casual
5) Intimate

Most speakers move from one variety to another according to the situation. Briefly, Frozen style is the style for print in legal documents or in briefs before the Supreme Court. Graduate students are forced to write dissertations in this frozen style, and that is probably why nobody reads them. It is defined by the fact that the reader is not permitted to cross-examine the author. As a result, everything must be clear -- clear to the point of tedium. The effect of frozen style in speech is to ensure that the speaker and the listener remain strangers.

Formal style is usually used in lectures and is the style that English composition teachers often demand that their students use. It can be defined by its use of detachment and cohesion. The speaker or writer remains aloof from his audience. Teachers often use this style when lecturing in the classroom, but few use it outside of class.

The third style, consultative, has two main characteristics:

1) The speaker supplies background information because he assumes that he will not be understood without it, and
2) The addressee participates continuously.

Because of these two features, consultative style is our norm for coming to terms with strangers -- people who speak our language, but

whose personal stock of information may be different. It is the type of language that we normally use in classroom discussion. It is a particularly important functional variety of language because it is the one that is generally used to explain how to do something.

Casual style is the speech for friends, acquaintances, and insiders. When a stranger is addressed in casual speech, he becomes an insider because we treat him as such. Casual speech can be identified by two principal devices: ellipsis and slang. Ellipsis is simply a matter of deleting part of the syntactic structure. Examples would be the shortening of I thank you to Thanks and I believe that I will be able to find the missing folder of John Smith to Believe I can. Slang, as the linguist defines it, is the fast changing group of "in words" that a group uses to solidify itself against outsiders. It is constantly changing to keep outsiders from understanding it. Teenage talk is a good example of this. A few years ago, teenagers had several meanings for "neat." Depending on the intonation pattern used, it could mean "interesting," "good," or "bad."

The last type of style, or the fifth clock, that Joos mentions is intimate. As the name suggests, it is the style used in intimate conversations, among lovers and very close friends. It has two characteristic features: extraction and jargon. Both are stable once the intimate group (usually a pair) has been formed. This is what distinguishes jargon from slang. Jargon is long-lived, whereas slang is ephemeral. In extraction the speaker extracts a minimum pattern from some conceivable sentence structure.

The ease with which most middle class Blacks can switch from formal or casual English to UBS further indicates that it is another variety of English. It is no more the result of laziness or carelessness than the New Englander dropping his r's in park the car (/pahk ðə kah/) or the Southerner substituting /n/ for /ŋ/ in running. Black speech represents a sixth clock, a variety between casual and intimate speech. In fact, this may be one reason that Whites often react negatively towards it. Because Whites are not part of this particular "in group," they are frozen out and they resent it.

Black English grew out of the segregation of Blacks from the main stream of American life during slavery. Blacks developed a linguistic system which enabled them to communicate in the presence of their masters without being understood by them. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the system was continued and reinforced by segregation so that today, in many respects, Black speech is similar to intimate speech. In intimate speech, even among other people, a husband or wife can signal the other in an unobtrusive way, unrecognized by outsiders, that it is time to go home, time to stop flirting, or time for one more drink. So it is with Black speech. It is a system closed to outsiders, and it provides close, emotional relationships among speakers. However, it cannot be considered a form of Joos's intimate speech because it involves many more than two speakers. It is rather a variety of English between intimate and casual speech. It is based upon a great deal of shared information and experiences that are rarely iterated. For this reason Black speech is used in informal

situations, but educated Black speakers almost always shift to a formal variety of English when in an intellectual discussion or when talking to Whites.

The principal characteristics of UBS are the ellipsis, jargon, and slang that are representative of casual and intimate speech. Even many of the grammatical features of UBS, such as deletion of the copula, are often found in the casual and intimate speech of SE speakers. However, the most obvious of these characteristics is the use of slang and jargon. There are a number of techniques involved in the use of slang, but one of the most prominent is the constant discussion of the behavior of others and a heavy emphasis on their nicknames. The use of nicknames emphasizes membership in the group and creates a feeling of closeness and belonging. This is similar in nature to most casual and intimate groups where everyone is called by his first name; and if it is a two syllable name or longer, it is often shortened to one syllable. Pet names for lovers such as Honey, Poopsie, and Snookie serve the same function.

Many slang terms are used in a sense that is diametrically opposed to the formal English usage. Examples of this type of ambiguous usage are words such as tough, heavy, and bad, all of which vary in meaning according to context and to the suprasegmentals used. For example, a 2, 3, 1 # sentence He's bad would mean that he is not good, or that he is evil. On the other hand, a 2, 3, 1, 4 # sentence He's bad would attribute positive characteristics such as strength and bravery to the person spoken about.

A few years ago, everything was "cool" to a teenager. A beautiful girl, an old car, or a hot wine punch could be "cool." In this case the slang was used by white teenagers to confuse their parents. A final example of slang would be It's now to mean that something is in style.

There are numerous examples of jargon in UBS. They are much better known because of their longevity. A few examples are such words as jive, to carry on a lively, joshing conversation; rap, an ordinary conversation or sometimes a distinctive fluid style; rap on, the verbal patterns a man uses to get a woman to go home with him; and hawk, a cold, piercing wind.

Most of the grammatical and phonological patterns of UBS are shared by casual and intimate speech. Most common of these is deleting the copula in questions such as "You gonna go?" or the elliptical question "Gonna go?" for the formal question, "Are you going to go?" However, there do seem to be a few grammatical usages that appear to be different from casual speech. These are the much discussed distributive be, present perfect been, and adverbial done. The distributive be is used in iterative contexts such as Sometimes I be working. The present perfect been does not mean that the action has been completed as it does in formal styles of English. Thus, she been married in UBS would mean she was married in the past and is still married. This contrasts with formal English where she has been married would mean she is no longer married. The third grammatical feature of UBS that is different from SE is the adverbial done in a

sentence such as After you kick the guy he done got the works. As Labov has pointed out, "Done has for all intents and purposes become an adverb, functioning sometimes like already or really and lost its status as a verb" (Labov, 56).

Examining and concentrating upon these three differences can have the detrimental effect of overemphasizing minor differences between UBS and formal English. Most groups that have developed casual and intimate speech patterns have similar types of differences from formal English that are used to keep outsiders from understanding.

However, these three distinctions are of little importance to composition teachers because they rarely, if ever, appear in written compositions. What teachers really need to do is to help inner city black students learn where a formal functional variety of English is needed and how the characteristics of formal English differ from UBS, the sixth clock.

This view of the relations of SE and UBS show that it is indeed a single system. English teachers, particularly composition teachers, need to help the students learn to use the appropriate variety at the appropriate time. That no single variety of English is appropriate for all occasions was demonstrated to me very vividly when I worked on a railroad construction crew in Montana. There were only a dozen or so of us college students on the crew, and all of us except one got along well with the gandies. He always spoke formal standard English with no slang or even ellipsis. As a result, the gandies ostracized him and began to throw rocks at him when he would go out in the bushes to

relieve himself. After being hit once or twice when he was in a helpless position, he quit the job. As English teachers, we need to be careful not to throw verbal rocks at out students when they are helpless. We need to show them the social contexts where formal English is appropriate while respecting their variety, the sixth clock, of English.

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